Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 10, No. 2 Spring, 2006

Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

YORK GATE COLLECTIONS:
Keyboards

The stringed instruments on the first floor of the Royal Academy of Music, London's York Gate Collections get most of the plaudits, but the floor above is just as special in many ways. Through the pianos on the second floor, we can trace the technical development of the grand piano in England during the first half of the nineteenth century, and contrast it with the daintier, Viennese style of instrument. These instruments have been selected to illustrate the creative relationships between players, composers and instrument makers and they are maintained in playing condition with the aid of a grant from the Leche Trust.

Kenneth Mobbs, formerly University of Bristol Senior Lecturer in Music, and his wife Mary write about their collection of pianos, which is now on permanent loan to the York Gate Collections.

At the age of fifty we decided it was high time to make a serious study of the interacting musical and mechanical histories behind the instrument we had each been playing for roughly 45 years. We soon were learning of pianos needing a good home, but after five years we still hadn't been able to acquire a classic English grand - until Kenneth ventured to a Sotheby's auction and came home owning two!

Grands

One of these is now in York Gate, with eight of its original companions. It is an 1808 Broadwood grand of six octaves compass with a Venetian Swell, the latter occasionally seen on late English harpsichords, but a very rare fitment indeed on pianos, "the forte on the grand pianoforte being designed to be made with the finger and not with the foot," as Broadwood charmingly wrote in 1799.

The main rival to this English action was the German, or Viennese action, here exemplified by the Heichele c.1820, with its bells, "bassoon", "drum" and "cymbals" - useful when playing for dancing, but its six pedals capable also of much subtler effects, for instance in the music of Schubert. The Erard 1836 demonstrates the most sophisticated double repetition action of the day, whereas the dramatic flame mahogany Broadwood 1844 concert grand (technically very similar to that used by Chopin in 1848) boasts a rather simpler, nevertheless effective, action.

Squares and Upright

The square (strictly "rectangular') pianos show the development of the purely domestic British instrument, ranging from the very small Ganer c.1785, through the stronger double-action Broadwood 1801 and the Clementi 1822 with the Bridge of Reverberation (adding a harmonic "sheen" to the sound), to the elegant Broadwood 1835, with its additional hammer checks. We can call the Russell 1895 upright a real museum piece, because its transposing function has now been completely usurped by modern user-friendly electronic keyboard wizardry.

We are sad that difficulties with walking make it impossible for us now to visit the Academy, but are delighted that these pianos are available for occasional study and controlled use - the very reason we started to collect 30 years ago. A checklist of all our instruments with further details is at www.mobbsearlykeyboard.co.uk

Christopher Nobbs, custodian of early pianos and harpsichords at the Academy, explains more about the instruments.

The twelve playing keyboard instruments in the York Gate collection span roughly a century and a half; from a Kirckman

harpsichord of 1764, when eight-year-old Mozart arrived in London, to a Steinway grand of 1920, the year of Schoenberg's first serial compositions. The Kirckman represents one of the final flowerings of the great harpsichord tradition originating in Flanders in the late sixteenth century; the Steinway the settled consensus of the long and relatively unchanging present of the modern piano. The two most important traditions in the development of the piano in the nineteenth century - the so-called "English" and "Viennese" designs - can be experienced in early examples; an 1808 grand by John Broadwood, very similar to that presented to Beethoven, and a roughly contemporary grand by Giovanni Heichele of Trieste. Heichele's piano with its six pedals, including the percussion of the "Turkish Music" and "Bassoon" stops, naturally causes the most immediate amusement and surprise, but all the instruments in their different and subtle ways show us how easy it is to forget that "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

A Broadwood grand of 1844 reminds us of the other most celebrated and sombre encounter of musical genius with London piano building; it is the same model (minus two top semitones) as that used by Chopin on his tour of England and Scotland in 1848, the year before he died. (The Academy owns the actual piano used by Chopin on this tour, which is on loan to the Cobbe Collection Trust at Hatchlands Park in Surrey. But too much piety is not good for any music making and the less sacred piano on the gallery can be played more freely.)

Music is not all genius and masterpieces. A sequence of four square pianos illustrates more modest music-making, although early squares were of greater musical significance than later examples and at first not simply domestic, or the equivalent of modern upright pianos. Broadwood's square of 1801 and Muzio Clementi's of 1822 are particularly impressive instruments.

Sebastien Erard's and William Stodart's grand pianos from around 1830 illustrate the welter of ingenuity, innovation, patents and fine craftsmanship leading up to the mid-century innovations, mostly American, which consolidated the foundations of modern piano design.

Although fine replicas of early pianos (at least of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries) are now available and can be heard in concert and recordings, to find a playable collection of historical examples in a conservatoire is very unusual. It provides a valuable resource and reference point for discovering the experience of players and listeners in the past. As well as illuminating the history of playing technique, the earlier keyboard instruments may suggest to students unexpected expressive possibilities on the modern instrument, or new sonorities in composition.

How do the pianos in York Gate work for their living? Aaron Shorr, Chair of the Academy's Keyboard Network, takes up the story.

At the heart of every Keyboard Network research event is the marvellous collection of historical pianos. This living and working museum provides an inspiring backdrop to a stimulating exchange of ideas between students, distinguished members of faculty and the public.

The York Gate Collections provide pianists with a vital link to the sonority and texture of music written in the classical and early romantic periods. The differences in the style and technology of these instruments often reflect distinct schools of pianism, which we can still see in the present day. The years from 1780 to 1860 saw an enormously varied and ingenious period of piano development. The piano makers active during this time literally shaped the tonal palette available to the performers and composers of the day and laid the foundation of new schools of technique, made possible by the responsiveness and sustaining qualities of these developing instruments.

Keyboard Network events often provide students and faculty with their very first opportunity to confront these important

historical instruments directly – frequently resulting in startling changes in perspective and, most importantly, revealing new interpretative possibilities on modern instruments. Typical myths about the tonal limits and fragility of these instruments are continually dispelled, revealing a sound world that is far more suggestive and turbulent than is normally supposed. These instruments are nothing short of a revolution in sound and need to be experienced first-hand in order to appreciate fully the core repertoire of the piano.

Roy Howat, Keyboard Research Fellow, adds some final insights.
One of the great boons of York Gate is the ease of moving instantly from one instrument to another, contrasting how the same piece of music emerges from different instruments spanning more than 100 years. A vivid example recently emerged in a workshop: a piece that had been deemed to sound a tad bland on the 1915 Steinway suddenly let loose a whirlwind of energy when replayed on the older Erard and Stodart, because of its inbuilt challenge to the instrument's sonority and capability. It's an equal revelation to hear Mozart's famous Turkish March with added bass drum and bells all coming from the piano, one built just after Mozart's lifetime.

Straight-strung pianos can be contrasted with cross-strung pianos: because fewer of their strings cross the middle of the soundboard, the sonority changes more from register to register. Several composers can be heard exploiting this, even up to Ravel. The presence of the still lovely 1915 Steinway model A is equally salutary. At one Chopin workshop it was being referred to, somewhat snootily, as a '"modern Steinway" until it was pointed out that it dates from much nearer Chopin's lifetime than the present day. This collection encourages us constantly to listen anew and re-evaluate.